Warning Concerning Copyright Restrictions

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the reproduction of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are permitted to furnish a reproduction if used for “private study, scholarship or research.” A second condition is that only single articles or chapters of a work totaling no more than 15% of the total number of pages be reproduced. Any use of a reproduction that exceeds these guidelines may be considered copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse any request for reproduction that is deemed a violation of current copyright guidelines.

This material has been reproduced from the following source:


Date prepared: 1/8/2008

This material is presented for use solely by authorized faculty and students of the Pennsylvania State University. Further reproduction or distribution of this material is expressly prohibited.

This material may be made available in alternative media upon request. Please contact Course Reserves Services at ereserves@psulias.psu.edu or by phone at (814) 863-0324.

If you are experiencing problems viewing or printing this document, please visit http://www.libraries.psu.edu/tas/reserve/useelectronicroserves.htm for troubleshooting information. If further assistance is required, please send a description of the problem to ereserves@psulias.psu.edu that includes the course and instructor for which the material is on reserve, as well as the title of the material.
The “Secularizing” of Poststructuralism: 
Cultural Studies a Decade On

Neil Larsen
University of California, Davis

The development of radical literary and cultural theory after the demise of Althusserianism—a period stemming from roughly the mid 1970s up through the present, at least as measured from a North American outpost—is to all appearances a complex one. On the one hand, as I have argued elsewhere, the core ideological conceits of Althusserianism continue to govern this development, albeit on a largely unconscious, “genealogical” plane of thinking. The grounding idealist and irrationalist impulses of the doctrine itself—what I have elsewhere termed Althusserianism’s “foregrounding hostility to theory as an epistemological category grounded in a process of representation,” or its “ban on consciousness” (Larsen, 1995; 27) — live on. It is Althusserianism as doctrinal form, the scholastically “theoretical” armature required to argue the supposed congruency of such impulses with Marxism, that has, with minor exceptions, passed down the road to extinction. This sounds like the recipe for an unrestrained plunge into much more openly retrograde positions, and, to an extent, this is the scene that confronts the would-be genealogist of “theoretical” ideologies, as evidenced, above all, in the post-Althusserian trajectory of what Peter Dews has termed the “French Ideology” (1995). Although deconstruction had already made many inroads into the humanities before the eclipse of Althusser, it is the latter’s terms in Textual Power, we might refer to this trend, only somewhat oxymoronically, as a “secular poststructuralism.” It is, in my observation, such a trend that, gradually but in accelerating measure over the course of the post-1968 period, becomes the principal theoretical vehicle for radical cultural theory in its dominant and fully-developed form.

A systematic critique of “secular poststructuralism” would lead inexorably to the work of Foucault, who remains, unquestionably I think, the deepest imprint on radical criticism in the wake of Althusser. Although the fervent interest in his work has gradually diminished in the years since his death in 1984, it is in Foucault’s attempt to convert the “subject position” bequeathed by the Althusserian theory of ideology from its rigid confinement within the grip of “structural determination” into a site from which a renewed “will to power” can be exerted that a “secular poststructuralism” comes closest to attaining its paradigmatic expression. If it can be allowed that our intellectually dominant form of cultural politics is born in the re-mapping of the locus of “subject-formation” as in itself the domain of the political, then it is Foucault who first consciously sets himself such a task and who supplies the model for most subsequent re-mapping efforts. This, I think, constitutes the chief intellectual and ideological importance of the successive theories of “discursive practice,” and “power/knowledge” advanced, most prominently, in The Archaeology of Knowledge, Discipline and Punish and in volume one of The History of Sexuality.

Many people, no doubt, continue to read Foucault out of a romantic fixation on the individual philosopher as spiritual progenitor of one or another “new social movement.” But while such a fixation may, indeed, coincide with a genuine intellectual debt to Foucault, this is not always or necessarily the case. In fact, the strongest reason for taking up Foucault again would be to disclose how currents within contemporary critical thought that do not consciously derive themselves from Foucauldianism and that for the most part

---

Neil Larsen teaches Critical Theory and Latin American and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Davis. He is the author of Modernism and Hegemony and Reading North by South (University of Minnesota Press) and is completing Nations, Narratives, History: on Problems of Theory and the “Postcolonial” for Verso.
eschew its particular ethical vocabulary and its aesthetic norms nevertheless erect themselves spontaneously upon conceptual bases first made available by Foucault.

Consider the case of “cultural studies,” an intellectual current that, about a decade ago, appeared to have pulled off a remarkable species of bloodless coup within the left wing of the humanities and even in certain radical sectors of the social sciences. Much of this doubtlessly had to do with the inoffensively broad connotations of the rubric itself: even the most elitist and rigidly formalist literary critic would allow that he or she is, in some sense, engaged in the “study” of “culture.” But the trend, despite its nebulous, no-stick inclusiveness, has also come to represent a discreet if not necessarily revolutionizing culmination of key developments in radical humanistic criticism over the last two decades. In a certain sense—although this is rarely stated openly—the “moment” of cultural studies corresponded to a tacit consensus on the need for previously warring camps—Marxism, poststructuralism, feminism, etc.—to downplay their differences and close ranks against the greater evil of a resurgent and militant right wing within the humanities. Contemporary historical watersheds—above all the “fall of socialism” in 1989 and the ensuing Gulf War—clearly loomed large over this fundamentally defensive intellectual strategy in the then current cultural “war of position.”

Not just any left critical approach to culture, however, counts as “cultural studies.” If the porosity of the signifier “culture” makes possible the initial, outward gesture of an eclectic critical peace in which Marxists and secular poststructuralists seek a common ground, the work actually performed by the concept itself suggests, I think, a hegemonic gain for the latter position. Indeed, one might argue that it is only with the ideological crystallization of the social sciences. Much of this doubtlessly had to do with the inoffensively broad connotations of the rubric itself: even the most elitist and rigidly formalist literary critic would allow that he or she is, in some sense, engaged in the “study” of “culture.” But the trend, despite its nebulous, no-stick inclusiveness, has also come to represent a discreet if not necessarily revolutionizing culmination of key developments in radical humanistic criticism over the last two decades. In a certain sense—although this is rarely stated openly—the “moment” of cultural studies corresponded to a tacit consensus on the need for previously warring camps—Marxism, poststructuralism, feminism, etc.—to downplay their differences and close ranks against the greater evil of a resurgent and militant right wing within the humanities. Contemporary historical watersheds—above all the “fall of socialism” in 1989 and the ensuing Gulf War—clearly loomed large over this fundamentally defensive intellectual strategy in the then current cultural “war of position.”

Not just any left critical approach to culture, however, counts as “cultural studies.” If the porosity of the signifier “culture” makes possible the initial, outward gesture of an eclectic critical peace in which Marxists and secular poststructuralists seek a common ground, the work actually performed by the concept itself suggests, I think, a hegemonic gain for the latter position. Indeed, one might argue that it is only with the ideological crystallization of cultural studies that the pressure for a secular poststructuralism discovers its own optimal conditions of equilibrium.

To concretize this, let me propose a close interrogation of one of the more representative if also more controversial and virtuosic intellectual performances in the now voluminous “cultural studies” repertoire—Andrew Ross’s 1989 work, No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture. No Respect presents itself for the most part as a history of the shifting and intensely contradictory relationship of North American intellectuals to popular culture, from the demise of the Popular Front and beginnings of the Cold War down to the present. Ross shows how, in the line of development that runs from the elitist, “left”—to—right anti—Communism of the New York Intellectuals into the resurgent popular cultural movements of the 1960s and after (“hip,” “camp,” etc.), the critical positioning of intellectuals with respect to mass or popular culture, whether describing an attitude of condemnation or celebration, has become more and more unstable. This, of course, is not an unfamiliar story. The novelty of No Respect—and in this it is typical of “cultural studies”—is that it reads this history of what a more traditional left intelligentsia might have viewed as the progressive “selling out” of intellectuals to the culture industry as, on the contrary, a providential one. There is a positive lesson to be learned here. As Ross himself describes his project:

...No Respect spans a history that includes the last generation of American intellectuals to swear unswerving allegiance to the printed word and the dictates of European taste, and the first generation to use their involvement with popular culture as a site of contestation in itself, rather than view it as an objective tool with which to raise or improve political consciousness; the last generation to view culture in the polarized marxist terms of a universal class struggle, and the first to accept the uneven development, across a diverse range of social groups and interests, of the contradictions of living within a capitalist culture; the last generation for whom the heroic mythologies of the unattached, dissident intellectual could still be acted out, and the first to insist that the institutionalizing or the commercializing of knowledge does not seal the fate of political criticism; the last to devolve its politics solely upon the mind and the labor of production, the first to appeal to the liberatory body, and the creativity of consumption. (11)

This is as good a statement of principles of “cultural studies” as one might wish to find: culture as a “site of contestation in itself”; as contradictory without ceasing to be “lived in”; as commodity and as node of resistance simultaneously, etc. Moreover, the question of its teleology aside here, No Respect makes a genuine bid to infer such principles from the study of cultural and intellectual history itself. This is, on the surface at least, a book about real cultural and political events—not the sort of thing someone with profound doubts as to the “hors-texte” or skittish of historical “grand récits” would likely produce. So where is the averred poststructuralist inflexion here?

To answer requires that we look more closely, within the historical frame, at the logic of these differences themselves, i.e., that we question “cultural studies,” against the grain of its seemingly non-theoretical, empirical self-presentation, as a particular form of theoretical statement concerning the relationship of politics and culture. We can take as paradigmatic here what is probably the best known and most controversial section of No Respect, the chapter entitled “The Popularity of Pornography.” In it Ross takes sharp issue with the critique of pornography advanced by a range of feminisms, according to which pornography represents a powerful social and cultural sanctioning of the sexual victimization of women by men, including rape. Ross, while not by any stretch a conscious apologist for such victimization, questions whether, by adopting such a condemning stance with respect to a popular cultural practice, feminism does not—trading class for gender—merely replicate the Cold War liberal intellectual’s traditionally elitist stance towards popular culture. “Both” critiques “share a picture of a monolithic culture of standard-
ized production and standardized effects, and of normalized brutality, whether within the mind or against the body.” (176) But, to explain the popularity of pornography from such a perspective requires that the “real needs” (190) that underly its popularity also be condemned, a logic that can only lead, according to Ross, to the threat of denying the “full sexual rights of sexual minorities” (177) and, in the final analysis, to the wholesale repression of the “liberatory imagination” as such. No doubt its feminist critics, as against, e.g., the neo-Constockians on the religious right, will oppose pornography with progressive political ends in mind. “But what,” asks Ross

if the popularity of such cultural forms as pornography...speaks to desires that cannot be described according to the articulate terms and categories of an intellectual’s conception of “politics.” What if the pleasures of pornography..., however complicit with patriarchal logic, prove to be resistant to direct pressure from a reformist agenda? Nothing seems more alien to the vanguardist function of the intellectual, trained, educated and committed to raise the consciousness of others, and to redeem ordinary people from what she or he sees as their ideological servitude. And yet nothing seems more certain than that the...pleasure of pornography...is autonomous; that it is not a false, spurious, displaced or addictive substitute for a more “authentic” world of social and sexual relations; and that it is not an already existing quantity that has merely been channeled into regressive shapes and forms, and which can therefore be channeled to other cultural forms or activities with more progressive meanings.

Reducing this somewhat, we are left with a nostrum that is naggingly familiar to “vanguard intellectuals,” or anyone else who has ever tried to argue the case for revolutionary change (or even radical reform) on street corners: “what you propose is hopeless; things are the way they are because people like it that way.” In its slightly more reflective and analytical mode, this becomes the classically liberal appeal to the existence of socially “neutral” mechanisms such as the “free market” or “free elections,” mechanisms which—once so abstracted—function as self-certifying guarantees that “free choice” is always already exercised. In No Respect the mechanism is “culture” as such, and Ross invokes “free choice” using terms less redolent of the liberal repertoire: “desire” and “pleasure.” The references to “sexual minorities” that pepper the essay, moreover, help to give it the “oppositional” flavor (the “liberal” becomes, for Ross, the “liberatory”) that, as we shall see, No Respect will not fail to claim for itself. But both the form of argument here and the fundamental social outlook are identical to those of the standard discourse of liberal apologetics. The “pleasure of pornography...is autonomous”; no other “more authentic” world of social and sexual relations could, in Ross’s thinking, justify compromising such “autonomy.” But suppose we remove the word “pornography” and substitute “money.” For “pleasure” read “desire” or even “greed”. “Human nature” for “autonomous.” No doubt Ross would balk at “respecting” this particular gem of popular culture, but No Respect provides no logical or theoretical basis on which to withhold “respect” for it either. Culture—and, as that category that objectively grounds culture by furnishing the individuals whose “needs” it meets, society per se—is thought here in its absolute, empirical positivity. Culture is what it is, culture is because, as we know, “people are people,” “boys will be boys.” etc. If a few blue-stocking intellectual feminists—or short-haired marxist-leninists—don’t like the way it is, or can’t live with it—well, maybe they should just concede to the “people” and let things be. It’s not just that such “vanguard intellectuals” have a hopeless task in trying to make the “people” think, or “desire” other than as they do. The mistake of the intellectuals for Ross is already to think that a “more authentic” [read: disalienated] world of social and sexual relations could be realized, to think that such a world is anything more than their own fantasy or projected desire as intellectuals. Neither Ross nor most others in the business of “cultural studies” customarily express their neoliberal populism in so extreme a fashion, it is true. But the fact remains that in theorizing popular culture as a “site of contestation in itself” (my emphasis), a “site” of absolute positivity within which one simply learns to “accept” the “contradictions of living within a capitalist culture” (as compensated by the “creativity of consumption”) tracts such as No Respect enforce a retreat from a theory of popular culture as negativity, as an entity that not only satisfies certain “real needs” but systematically suppresses and denies others no less real (cf. Larsen, 1996). Ross’s positivism is blind to “needs” that, in the existing culture, may not have the means to recognize or articulate themselves consciously as “needs,” particularly if their satisfaction would require a “more authentic” world of social and sexual relations. Moreover, the theory that capitalist popular culture, like capitalist productive relations, might contain within itself the “stirrings” of such a world is likewise sacrificed here. Although it may be the will to “contestation” that ostensibly impels the new, “cultural studies” style of intellectual to cast off all inhibitions regarding popular taste and embrace popular culture as is, the real question is: what remains to be “contested” once “need,” “desire,” etc. have been posited as untranscendable, empirical absolutes?

It is here, precisely, that “cultural studies” rotates along its poststructuralist axis—an axis otherwise effectively concealed behind its cultural-positivist surface. Consider, again, “The Popularity of Pornography.” In making his case against the anti-pornography feminists, Ross stresses the particular use made of pornography by the “lesbian S/M community” as a “sexual minority” that experiments with the reversal of power roles in traditional S/M practices. Against a possible intellectual-feminist charge that such a “claim to empowerment through...shifts in identification” is no more than a ruse of patriarchal ideology, Ross seconds the “liberationist claims for S/M”: that it in fact is, or could be
Neil Larsen

an area of imaginative experience in which the nonprivileged, both men and women, could make sense of their current social powerlessness in ways that transformed suffering into pleasure. If S/M... could be an official ritual of domination, then it could also be an unofficial theater of opposition and subversion. (193)

The immediately striking thing about such reasoning, its calculatedly sexual “shock effect” aside, is how easily it slides into an apology for “social powerlessness” itself, so long as a way can be found to “transform suffering into pleasure.” Why not go on to defend, say, the “rights” to heroin or crack addiction as such an “area of imaginative experience”? But more significant here is the extremely subtle fashion in which Ross contests the feminist argument—that pornography (the cultural, the representational) reinforces or legitimizes patterns of sexual and social behavior that in turn feed and perpetuate the victimization of women (the political, the practical)—by simply eliding the behavioral or practical-political side of the question. Ross does not defend pornography, or the alternative sexual representations and behaviors it is claimed to enable, as aspects of culture that might contribute to alleviating the social problem as such—as, for example, a feminist might defend the dissemination of anti-sectist advertisements or children’s literature. Or if he does, he gives no concrete indication whatsoever of how the uses of pornography made by members of, say, the lesbian S/M community might translate into a practical, social amelioration for women. The potentially subversive and oppositional character of S/M is proposed here, but only as an act of subversion internal to culture and representation, as a form of “theater.” Pornography is potentially “radical” insofar as it becomes a symbolic staging area for the reversal or restructuration of “roles.” But the actual forms of behavior to which these “roles” refer and which they, in the thinking of the feminist opposition to pornography, consciously or unconsciously validate or invalidate, have abruptly ceased to be factors in Ross’s cultural politics. What is “radical” about pornography is merely the manner in which it deconstructs the roles in their symbolic structuration. The “roles” themselves have now lost their sociological pertinence and operate only as meanings, as signifiers, etc. Thus the feminist argument against pornography, whatever its strengths and weaknesses, has not really been engaged at all, but simply re-cast as if it were strictly an argument about symbolic effects. Pornography is acquitted of its social pathology because it is no longer a social event at all. Pornography—and with it culture as such—has become “social text.”

This casual slide from culture-as-the-empirical-absolute to culture-as-textuality repeats itself throughout No Respect, whenever Ross is cornered into devising a radical alibi for his neo-positivist social-liberalism. So, for example, at the conclusion to “Reading the Rosenbergs,” his otherwise very well-taken and scrupulously informed rebuke to the anti-Popular Front cultural elitism of the New York Intellectuals, Ross defends the Popular Front “dialogue” with popular culture for taking popular culture seriously. Not as a tool of enlightenment to be used for (good) education, or as a channel of subordination to be resisted for its (bad) domination: the positions of the liberal pluralist and the liberal dissenter respectively. But as a terrain on which political meanings could be won or lost. (41)

But the question here is left begging: just what is a “political meaning” and how does one know whether—and to what practical effect—one has “won” or “lost” one of them? Of course, it is difficult ever to know, much less predict with certainty the practical, political effects of culture, and to know whether such effects have, overall, been truly emancipatory. But in rejecting culture as either “tool of enlightenment” or “channel of subordination” Ross purchases a halo of ethically purified egalitarianism at the cost of relinquishing the thought of culture itself as a mediational link between the world of political praxis and the given, subjective experiences of social individuals. Only by thinking culture as such a link—as, to be explicit, a form of social consciousness itself—can it even begin to make sense to talk about culture as capable of political “wins and losses.” Ross’s “liberals”—a strange use of the term since it obviously would include marxists and even “stalinists” but does not include Ross himself—at least have that advantage. The concept of “meanings” here, however, unlike that of consciousness, cannot be articulated to any objectively mediational process; it posits culture as something capable only of turning back on itself in an endless process of re-signification. “Politics” here describes nothing but the purely semiotic overturning implied in such an idea. It is, again, the “politics” of poststructuralism’s “theater” of textuality. Perhaps one will object here that “meanings” do impinge on the formation of subjects, and that in this, indirect way, they also impinge on the praxis of these subjects. But this is as good as saying that “meanings” too are modes or attributes of consciousness, in which case “meanings” too are liable to be thought of as “tools of enlightenment,” etc. The rule in operation here and throughout No Respect may be stated as follows: accuse the “intellectuals” of “idealizing” culture, of converting it from a raw “experience” into a medium or “tool” of consciousness; but as soon as it falls to you to explain how this new positivist “respect” for popular culture can improve matters politically, how it can become the basis for a more successful cultural politics (for that is clearly the promise on offer in No Respect), idealize culture yourself by reducing it to a plane of “meanings” etc. Culture as the empirical, as “real need,” remains safely identical to itself, while culture as “meanings” instantly frees itself of all such fixity. The trick consists in making the switch before the reader with “vanguard” tendencies has had time to react.

I have suggested that No Respect roughly typifies “cultural studies” in its formal-theoretical dualism: a “common sense” and quietist cultural positivism supplemented by a militant poststructuralist jargon of “subversion.” I can’t supply all the evidence for this assertion here. But I would nevertheless wager heavily that, while the self-appointed guardians of “cultural studies"
may not consciously police the movement against nonbelievers, the bottomline is a tacit faith in culture as both inert fact and as sphere of radical praxis. As the editors of the 1992 Routledge anthology Cultural Studies state it, culture is both “a way of life—encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions and structures of power—and a range of cultural practices: artistic forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass-produced commodities, and so forth” (5). This sounds perfectly uncontroversial, almost a triviality—until one considers that as such a “way of life” culture already ceases to be questioned in its negativity as a social determination; it is only as “cultural practice” (and the emphasis here falls on “cultural”), i.e., as “text,” etc., that its negativity can be mobilized. But mobilized against what? Exclusively against itself, as the next link in the chain of cultural “signifiers.” “There is,” as the Routledge anthology editors go on to say, “a kind of double articulation of culture in cultural studies, where ‘culture’ is simultaneously the ground on which analysis proceeds, the object of study, and the site of political critique and intervention.” (ibid) “Site” is clearly a favorite bit of jargon here for “cultural studies.” It is a cue to militancy; it conjures up scenes of struggle, even of warfare. But its logic is exclusionary, and thus its meaning here is, in practice, quite the opposite: as “the ‘—not just ‘a’—‘site’ of politics,” culture in fact displaces the non-cultural, as instanced in spheres such as the economy, the state, class relations, or even society per se. Culture as “way of life” nicely evokes the presence of such non-cultural spheres, occupying a kind of ultimate horizon of material-social mediation. But as “site” culture abruptly usurps the horizon itself, and seizes the prerogative of supplying its own mediating categories as “cultural practices.” The “double articulation” is effectively a euphemism here for a social-cultural dualism.

To be precise, however, not all adepts of “cultural studies” have played the same, “secular poststructuralist” language game, at least not with their present set of rules. Take the case of one of the movement’s legendary founders, Raymond Williams. In his 1958 essay, “Culture is Ordinary,” Williams, like Ross and contemporary cultural studies, unapologetically celebrates popular culture in its positivity and immediacy, although in a more staid, “humanist” idiom: “Culture is ordinary. An interest in learning or the arts is simple, pleasant and natural. A desire to know what is best, and to do what is good, is the whole positive nature of man” (7). Williams’s polemical targets are, moreover, roughly congruent with Ross’s: an elitist cultural conservatism represented by the Leavisites, and a Marxist or left denigration of popular culture that regards it as inseparably tied to a decadent, monopoly capitalist order. Williams rejects the idea, which he attributes to the Cambridge cell of the British Communist Party to which he had once briefly been recruited (but which obviously has its “feudal socialist,” Leavisite version as well) that “the advocacy of a different system of production is in some ways a cultural directive, indicating not only a way of life but new arts and learning” (8). A culture is “common meanings” but such “meanings” cannot be “prescribed”, “meanings” are “made by living, made and remade, in ways we cannot know in advance”(ibid.).

But, unlike No Respect and “cultural studies” per se in its more recent, second “moment”, “Culture is Ordinary” shows no inclination to go on and posit popular culture as a “site of contestation in itself.” Culture is made of “meanings,” but “meanings,” for Williams, do not themselves constitute a “politics.” Rather, “meanings” represent a term of mediation, linking the “common” and the individual, the “traditional” and the “creative,” “society” and “mind” (4). Politics, one infers here, would not measure its “wins and losses” in the immediate cultural form of “meanings” but in terms—the social, the individual—that culture-as-meanings itself serves to mediate.

Why this difference? The answer, I would suggest, is that Williams is under no ideological compulsion to devise radical alibis for his cultural positivism. And that is so because the popular culture Williams celebrates belongs to a social order (ca. 1958) he celebrates as well: post-World War II “socialist” Britain, safely (or so it seemed) commended to the superintendency of the British Labour Party. Williams accepts the Marxist view that a “culture must be finally interpreted in relation to its underlying system of production” (7) but rejects this as a basis for cultural “directives” and prescriptions because, in effect, Williams is quite comfortable with the “underlying system of production” as it is—at least in 1958 Britain. “...[T]he central problem of our society in the coming half-century,” writes Williams, “is the use of our new resources to make a good common culture; the means to a good, abundant economy we already understand”(10). This is “cultural politics,” but of quite a different sort from that which predominates today.

Later, no doubt, Williams would become much less sanguine about Labour’s command of the “means to a good, abundant economy,” but his earlier frankness here as a celebrant of imperial social democracy tells us, I think, a good deal about why, some three decades later, his explicit cultural positivism would strike such a resonant chord among left intellectuals with the fall of the Berlin Wall echoing in their ears and the memory of the sixties “cultural revolution” still fresh. Circa 1989, popular culture may have appeared, at any rate, to be the only positivity still standing. The crucial difference here, of course, is that an Andrew Ross, or even a Stuart Hall, scorchcd by the desert winds of the Reagan and Thatcher years, cannot share in Williams’s direct social apologetics. Culture is good (or at least not as bad as everything else), but it now stands in opposition to the existing social order—or must be made to appear to do so. Williams’s culture as positivized “site” of the “essential quality of living of its consumers” (12) must now be made out to be a “site of contestation in itself,” i.e., the “site” of its own self-contestation. Such a leap, however, will require a conceptual maneuver of considerable complexity—a requirement that poststructuralism, rich in equivocatory powers undreamt of by the Williams of 1958, bravely steps
forward to meet.

In order, that is, for a cultural studies theorist such as Ross to propose, in apparent good faith, a form of radical cultural activism operant exclusively in the domain of "meanings," he must have already available to him some conceptual medium through which cultural studies' "social-cultural dualism" can be elided. "Culture" as both a positive empirical fact and as a purportedly emancipatory, but strictly textual "site" must, if these two antithetical poles are not to shear off from one another, strike the secular poststructuralist as already reducible to some third, pseudo-mediational term—a term that cannot be supplied by the conventionally "humanist," socially apologetic cultural positivism of the early Williams. And it is Foucault who, more than any other recent supplier of "theory," furnishes this term, theorized under a series of headings beginning with the idea of "discursive practice." But that is the subject for another, more prolonged discussion.

The present essay was written as an introduction to a longer critique of Foucauldianism, itself part of a longer work-in-progress.

---

Works Cited


